

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN WHICH THE RACE IS NOT TO THE SWIFT

THE three Indians of whom we must rid ourselves were approved warriors, fierce as wolves, cunning as foxes, keen-eyed as hawks. They had no reason to doubt us, to dream that we would turn upon them, but from habit they watched us, with tomahawk and knife resting lightly in their belts.

As for us, we walked slowly, smiled freely, and spoke frankly. The sunshine streaming down in the spaces where the trees fell away was not brighter than our mood. Had we not smoked the peace pipe? Were we not on our way home? Diccon, walking behind me, fell into a low-voiced conversation with the savage who strode beside him. It related to the barter for a dozen otterskins of a gun which he had at Jamestown. The savage was to bring the skins to Paspahagh at his earliest convenience, and Diccon would meet him there and give him the gun, provided the pelts were to his liking. As they talked, each, in his mind's eye, saw the other dead before him. The one meant to possess a gun, indeed, but he thought to take it himself from the munition house at Jamestown; the other knew that the otter which died not until this Indian's arrow quivered in its side would live until doomsday. Yet they discussed the matter gravely, hedging themselves about with provisos, and, the bargain clinched, walked on side by side in the silence of a perfect and all-comprehending amity.

The sun rode higher and higher, gilding the misty green of the budding trees, quickening the red maple bloom into fierce scarlet, throwing lances of light down through the pine branches to splinter against the dark earth far below. For an hour it shone; then clouds gathered and shut it from sight. The forest darkened, and the wind arose with a shriek. The young trees cowered before the blast, the strong and vigorous beat their branches together with a groaning sound, the old and worn fell crashing to the earth. Presently the rain rushed down, slant lines of silver tearing through the wood with the sound of the feet of an army; hail followed, a torrent of ice beating and bruising all tender green things to the earth. The wind took the multitudinous sounds, — the cries of frightened birds, the creaking trees, the snap of breaking boughs, the crash of falling giants, the rush of the rain, the drumming of the hail, — enwound them with itself, and made the forest like a great shell held close to the ear.

There was no house to flee to; so long as we could face the hail we staggered on, heads down, buffeting the wind; but at last, the fury of the storm increasing, we were fain to throw ourselves upon the earth, in a little brake, where an overhanging bank somewhat broke the wind. A mighty oak, swaying and groaning above us, might fall and crush us like eggshells; but if we went on, the like fate might meet us in the way. Broken and withered limbs, driven by the wind, went past us like crooked shadows; it grew darker and darker, and the air was deadly cold.

The three Indians pressed their faces against the ground; they dreamed not of harm from us, but Okee was in the merciless hail and the first thunder of the

year, now pealing through the wood. Suddenly Diccon raised himself upon his elbow, and looked across at me. Our eyes had no sooner met than his hand was at his bosom. The savage nearest him, feeling the movement, as it were, lifted his head from the earth, of which it was so soon to become a part; but if he saw the knife, he saw it too late. The blade, driven down with all the strength of a desperate man, struck home; when it was drawn from its sheath of flesh, there remained to us but a foe apiece.

In the instant of its descent I had thrown myself upon the Indian nearest me. It was not a time for overniceness. If I could have done so, I would have struck him in the back while he thought no harm; as it was, some subtle instinct warning him, he whirled himself over in time to strike up my hand and to clench with me. He was very strong, and his naked body, wet with rain, slipped like a snake from my hold. Over and over we rolled on the rain-soaked moss and rotted leaves and cold black earth, the hail blinding us, and the wind shrieking like a thousand watching demons. He strove to reach the knife within his belt; I, to prevent him, and to strike deep with the knife I yet held.

At last I did so. Blood gushed over my hand and wrist, the clutch upon my arm relaxed, the head fell back. The dying eyes glared into mine; then the lids shut forever upon that unquenchable hatred. I staggered to my feet and turned, to find that Diccon had given account of the third Indian.

We stood up in the hail and the wind, and looked at the dead men at our feet. Then, without speaking, we went our way through the tossing forest, with the hailstones coming thick against us, and the wind a

strong hand to push us back. When we came to a little trickling spring, we knelt and washed our hands.

The hail ceased, but the rain fell and the wind blew throughout the morning. We made what speed we could over the boggy earth against the storm, but we knew that we were measuring miles where we should have measured leagues. There was no breath to waste in words, and thought was a burden quite intolerable; it was enough to stumble on through the partial light, with a mind as gray and blank as the rain-blurred distance.

At noon the clouds broke, and an hour later the sunshine was streaming down from a cloudless heaven, beneath which the forest lay clear before us, naught stirring save shy sylvan creatures to whom it mattered not if red man or white held the land.

Side by side Diccon and I hurried on, not speaking, keeping eye and ear open, proposing with all our will to reach the goal we had set, and to reach it in time, let what might oppose. It was but another forced march; many had we made in our time, through dangers manifold, and had lived to tell the tale.

There was no leisure in which to play the Indian and cover up our footprints as we made them, but when we came to a brook we stepped into the cold, swift-flowing water, and kept it company for a while. The brook flowed between willows, thickly set, already green, and overarching a yard or more of water. Presently it bent sharply, and we turned with it. Ten yards in front of us the growth of willows ceased abruptly, the low, steep banks shelved downwards to a grassy level, and the stream widened into a clear and placid pool, as blue as the sky above. Crouched upon the grass or standing in the shallow water were

some fifteen or twenty deer. We had come upon them without noise; the wind blew from them to us, and the willows hid us from their sight. There was no alarm, and we stood a moment watching them before we should throw a stone or branch into their midst and scare them from our path.

Suddenly, as we looked, the leader threw up his head, made a spring, and was off like a dart, across the stream and into the depths of the forest beyond. The herd followed. A moment, and there were only the trodden grass and the troubled waters; no other sign that aught living had passed that way.

"Now what was that for?" muttered Diccon. "I'm thinking we had best not take to the open just yet."

For answer I parted the willows, and forced myself into the covert, pressing as closely as possible against the bank, and motioning him to do the same. He obeyed, and the thick-clustering gold-green twigs swung into place again, shutting us in with the black water and the leafy, crumbling bank. From that green dimness we could look out upon the pool and the grass, with small fear that we ourselves would be seen.

Out of the shadow of the trees into the grassy space stepped an Indian; a second followed, a third, a fourth,—one by one they came from the gloom into the sunlight, until we had counted a score or more. They made no pause, a glance telling them to what were due the trampled grass and the muddied water. As they crossed the stream one stooped and drank from his hand, but they said no word and made no noise. All were painted black; a few had face and chest striped with yellow. Their headdresses were tall and wonderful, their leggings and moccasins fringed with

scalp locks; their hatchets glinted in the sunshine, and their quivers were stuck full of arrows. One by one they glided from the stream into the thick woods beyond. We waited until we knew that they were deep in the forest, then crept from the willows and went our way.

"They were Youghtenunds," I said, in the low tones we used when we spoke at all, "and they went to the southward."

"We may thank our stars that they missed our trail," Diccon answered.

We spoke no more, but, leaving the stream, struck again toward the south. The day wore on, and still we went without pause. Sun and shade and keen wind, long stretches of pine and open glades where we quickened our pace to a run, dense woods, snares of leafless vines, swamp and thicket through which we toiled so slowly that the heart bled at the delay, streams and fallen trees,—on and on we hurried, until the sun sank and the dusk came creeping in upon us.

"We've dined with Duke Humphrey to-day," said Diccon at last; "but if we can keep this pace, and don't meet any more war parties, or fall foul of an Indian village, or have to fight the wolves to-night, we'll dine with the Governor to-morrow. What's that?"

"That" was the report of a musket, and a spent ball had struck me above the knee, bruising the flesh beneath the leather of my boot.

We wheeled, and looked in the direction whence had come that unwelcome visitor. There was naught to be seen. It was dusk in the distance, and there were thickets too, and fallen logs. Where that ambushade was planted, if one or twenty Indians lurked

in the dusk behind the trees, or lay on the further side of those logs, or crouched within a thicket, no mortal man could tell.

"It was a spent ball," I said. "Our best hope is in our heels."

"There are pines beyond, and smooth going," he answered; "but if ever I thought to run from an Indian!"

Without more ado we started. If we could outstrip that marksman, if we could even hold our distance until night had fallen, all might yet be well. A little longer, and even an Indian must fire at random; moreover, we might reach some stream and manage to break our trail. The ground was smooth before us, — too smooth, and slippery with pine needles; the pines themselves stood in grim brown rows, and we ran between them lightly and easily, husbanding our strength. Now and again one or the other looked behind, but we saw only the pines and the gathering dusk. Hope was strengthening in us, when a second bullet dug into the earth just beyond us.

Diccon swore beneath his breath. "It struck deep," he muttered. "The dark is slow in coming."

A minute later, as I ran with my head over my shoulder, I saw our pursuer, dimly, like a deeper shadow in the shadows far down the arcade behind us. There was but one man, — a tall warrior, strayed aside from his band, perhaps, or bound upon a war-path of his own. The musket that he carried some English fool had sold him for a mess of pottage.

Putting forth all our strength, we ran for our lives, and for the lives of many others. Before us the pine wood sloped down to a deep and wide thicket, and beyond the thicket a line of sycamores promised water.

If we could reach the thicket, its close embrace would hide us, — then the darkness and the stream. A third shot, and Diccon staggered slightly.

"For God's sake, not struck, man?" I cried.

"It grazed my arm," he panted. "No harm done. Here's the thicket!"

Into the dense growth we broke, reckless of the blood which the sharp twigs drew from face and hands. The twigs met in a thick roof over our heads; that was all we cared for, and through the network we saw one of the larger stars brighten into being. The thicket was many yards across. When we had gone thirty feet down we crouched and waited for the dark. If our enemy followed us, he must do so at his peril, with only his knife for dependence.

One by one the stars swam into sight, until the square of sky above us was thickly studded. There was no sound, and no living thing could have entered that thicket without noise. For what seemed an eternity, we waited; then we rose and broke our way through the bushes to the sycamores, to find that they indeed shadowed a little sluggish stream.

Down this we waded for some distance before taking to dry earth again. Since entering the thicket we had seen and heard nothing suspicious, and were now fain to conclude that the dark warrior had wearied of the chase, and was gone on his way toward his mates and that larger and surer quarry which two suns would bring. Certain it is that we saw no more of him.

The stream flowing to the south, we went with it, hurrying along its bank, beneath the shadow of great trees, with the stars gleaming down through the branches. It was cold and still, and far in the distance we heard wolves hunting. As for me, I felt no

weariness. Every sense was sharpened ; my feet were light ; the keen air was like wine in the drinking ; there was a star low in the south that shone and beckoned. The leagues between my wife and me were few. I saw her standing beneath the star, with a little purple flower in her hand.

Suddenly, a bend in the stream hiding the star, I became aware that Diccon was no longer keeping step with me, but had fallen somewhat to the rear. I turned, and he was leaning heavily, with drooping head, against the trunk of a tree.

"Art so worn as that?" I exclaimed. "Put more heart into thy heels, man!"

He straightened himself and strode on beside me. "I don't know what came over me for a minute," he answered. "The wolves are loud to-night. I hope they'll keep to their side of the water."

A stone's throw farther on, the stream curving to the west, we left it, and found ourselves in a sparsely wooded glade, with a bare and sandy soil beneath our feet, and above, in the western sky, a crescent moon. Again Diccon lagged behind, and presently I heard him groan in the darkness.

I wheeled. "Diccon!" I cried. "What is the matter?"

Before I could reach him he had sunk to his knees. When I put my hand upon his arm and again demanded what ailed him, he tried to laugh, then tried to swear, and ended with another groan. "The ball did graze my arm," he said, "but it went on into my side. I'll just lie here and die, and wish you well at Jamestown. When the red imps come against you there, and you open fire on them, name a bullet for me."

CHAPTER XXXV

IN WHICH I COME TO THE GOVERNOR'S HOUSE

I LAID him down upon the earth, and, cutting away his doublet and the shirt beneath, saw the wound, and knew that there was a journey indeed that he would shortly make. "The world is turning round," he muttered, "and the stars are falling thicker than the hailstones yesterday. Go on, and I will stay behind, — I and the wolves."

I took him in my arms and carried him back to the bank of the stream, for I knew that he would want water until he died. My head was bare, but he had worn his cap from the gaol at Jamestown that night. I filled it with water and gave him to drink ; then washed the wound and did what I could to stanch the bleeding. He turned from side to side, and presently his mind began to wander, and he talked of the tobacco in the fields at Weyanoke. Soon he was raving of old things, old camp fires and night-time marches and wild skirmishes, perils by land and by sea ; then of dice and wine and women. Once he cried out that Dale had bound him upon the wheel, and that his arms and legs were broken, and the woods rang to his screams. Why, in that wakeful forest, they were unheard, or why, if heard, they went unheeded, God only knows.

The moon went down, and it was very cold. How black were the shadows around us, what foes might